

Will a change of convener at the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority make a difference?

Description

James Stuart, the convener of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA), has to step down in February having been on the board for eight years. At the LLTNPA Board Meeting on Monday Heather Reid – the former broadcaster known to many as Heather the Weather – was elected to replace him. That presents an opportunity for the LLTNPA board to become far more effective than it has been under Mr Stuart's leadership.

Mr Stuart's regime – spin and no substance

The LLTNPA issued a news release following the Board Meeting about the change in convener ([see here](#)) which epitomises the public facing part of Mr Stuart's period of office:

I'd like to be the first to congratulate Heather on her appointment as Convener. It has been a huge privilege to have been able to serve in that role for the last six years and I believe Heather will be able to take the Park Authority to even greater heights.

All self-congratulations and no self-criticism. And what heights are those?

His eight years on the National Park Board saw the Park Authority responding to considerable growth in visitor numbers, the Covid-19 pandemic and growing urgency to act on the climate and nature crises.

That just about sums it up. The Visitor Management season Review ([see here](#)) presented to the meeting on Monday partially contradicted the claim about growth in visitors, reporting numbers had reduced this year and showing that the numbers of boats being registered on Loch Lomond had reduced considerably.

How well the LLTNPA has managed visitors or responded to the Covid pandemic – I don't deny this was difficult – are moot points but they quietly ditched any idea of renewing their much delayed ([see here](#)) and vacuous ([see here](#)) outdoor recreation plan in the summer .

As for the climate and nature crises, 'growing urgency' has not resulted in action. On the same day as the Board meeting the LLTNPA advertised a contract for a baseline review of the state of nature in the National Park ([see here](#)):

II.2.4) Description of the procurement

As part of the publication of the Future Nature Route map this year and for our National Park Partnership Plan we are looking for a consultant to help us establish a baseline review of the State of Nature in the Park. We are interested in proposals which show the best value, rationale and approach to giving a good baseline assessment of the overall state of our network.

We are looking for an independent, overall assessment of the state of nature in the National Park that uses a range of data and indicators to provide a simple summary of the overall state whilst highlighting elements which are in a better state and those which are priorities and opportunities for improvement.

Our Future Nature Strategy focuses on landscape scale habitat restoration and connectivity so we would welcome proposals that match this approach.

We would prefer that the work include a transparent description of your methodology to allow comparable reports to be repeated at five-year intervals to assess progress up to 2040

20 years after it was created, the LLTNPA still lacks basic information about the state of nature in the National Park!

I will come back to the LLTNPA's Future Nature Route Map, which was discussed on Monday, in due course. In some ways it is a significant step forward but it has taken over two years to develop despite the nature crisis and still nothing really meaningful has been delivered.

The LLTNPA now has a Future Nature Development Manager. Contrast that, however, with the 58 seasonal rangers employed this year. Without more staff working on the right issues, the LLTNPA will not do anything meaningful to address the climate and nature crises. Mr Stuart had an opportunity to change that and stop the LLTNPA wasting enormous amounts of money on trying to enforce the disastrous camping byelaws and on marketing. He chose not to rock the boat. The result has been another six wasted years for the LLTNPA.

National Parks and freeports - a difficult balancing act

It was not until I saw that Mr Stuart had been appointed to the Lake District National Park Authority since his move to England ([see here](#)) that I realised he was also involved in the Tees Valley Authority. As a regular reader of Private Eye since the pandemic, I almost choked on my porridge. The Tees Valley Authority and its buccaneering mayor, Ben Houchen, features in almost every issue - including the current Xmas edition:

TEES VALLEY

Weavers' web

MORE money for muckers on Teesside, courtesy of Tees Valley mayor Ben Houchen's handing of control of the development of Europe's largest brownfield site and the centre of Britain's flagship freeport area to a group of local businessmen (*Eyes passim*).

In March 2020 Houchen (*pictured*) created a joint venture, Teesworks Ltd, between the South Tees Development Corporation and a group of local developers. It was handed options to buy freeholds across a 4,500-acre site on the south of the Tees estuary (which the corporation had acquired via compulsory purchase) and lease the land to a new wave of green businesses promised for the former site of a large chunk of Britain's steel industry.

Then, in November 2021, the businessmen, led by local developers Chris Musgrave and Martin Corney, were handed a further 40 percent share of Teesworks, taking their control to 90 percent – all without any payment (even though they would quickly net millions of pounds from metal left on the site).

The idea was that the joint venture would be responsible for “developing and marketing” the site, ie attracting the businesses that would transform the region. But rather than Teesworks Ltd paying all the costs of doing so, the development corporation itself paid for an expensive corporate finance adviser.

Over a year from the summer of 2021, official spending data show, the corporation and its parent Tees Valley Combined Authority paid £111,000 plus expenses to a company called Runswick Capital, owned and run by corporate finance adviser Paul Weavers from a flat in Hampstead, London. His work, he told the *Eye*, “covered several inward investment projects” (although with few

takers on Teesside so far, not a lot seems to have come from it). One project that Weavers was involved in was an abortive attempt by the South Tees Development Corporation to buy a company controlling one part of the land that it hadn't acquired in the compulsory purchase process, Teesport owner PD Ports (the corporation and company remain in dispute over access rights).

Weavers happens to be an old business partner of Chris Musgrave, having teamed up with him in 2010 for a bid for what was then a Corus steel plant on Teesside. He admits to having “known Mr Musgrave for many years” and having “worked with him on a number of projects over the years”, and that he was awarded the advisory contract without any competition. “There was an immediate need for services that I was uniquely well placed to provide immediately,” he claimed, “being a native of Teesside but having lived in London for over 30 years and having an excellent network of contacts with London-based private investors and professional firms.” So that's all right then.

● As if to drive home what an insiders' club the Tees Valley has become, when Houchen was interviewed last month by *Tees Business* magazine and asked for his favourite local independent business, he replied: “House of Zana in Darlington. Great fashion business run by a high-flying businesswoman who took on the big boys and won.” He was referring to the shop's successful defence against high street chain Zara's attempts to make it change its name. Which must explain his preference for the business over thousands of others, and not the fact that it's owned by the daughter of Teesworks tyro Martin Corney. What a small world!



Mr Houchen, is something of a hero to the the extreme right in this country having breached the so called red wall. The proposals by Kwasi Kwarteng during his brief time as chancellor to extend the

number of freeports appear to have been very much modelled on what was going on on Teeside (where two new freeports were proposed).

Besides the Â£ millions of public money being given to developers to restore the former steel works, the dredging of the Tees appears to have caused or contributed to a massive environmental disaster which public agencies in England are still denying ([see here](#)).



Protesters gathered at Teesworks on Wednesday 14 December to call for a pause on dredging the River Tees.

Mr Houchen has promised to compensate all the fisher folk who have lost their livelihoods because of the deaths of crustaceans along the coast â?? one wonders if it will eventually affect Scotland â?? but refused to stop the dredging until an inquiry can be held. He and the developers around him appear to have no interest in protecting the natural environment or wildlife and no regard for the precautionary principle.

From meeting minutes I have established that Mr Stuart joined the Tees Valley Combined Authority Audit and Governance Committee sometime in the summer of 2021. This was as an â??independent memberâ?• and according to his register of interests this role is not remunerated. Why Mr Stuart joined what appears to be a rogue outfit is unclear. Perhaps he thought he could stop the abuse of public monies and the environment near his home in Darlington? If so, I look forward to reading in Private Eye on how he blew the whistle on Mr Houchen.

One wonders whether the Scottish Government, who have strongly opposed freeports in Scotland, have been aware of Mr Stuartâ??s involvement in the Teeside Authority and what they think this says about his commitment to the statutory aims of Scotlandâ??s National Parks?

The challenge facing Heather Reid

Under AOB at the board meeting on Monday, the locally elected member for Balloch and south west Loch Lomond, Sid Perrie, tried to raise a matter that parkswatch has highlighted many times. Why does the LLTNPA not provide every board member an email so they can be contacted by the public as happens in other National Parks? He was not supported by a single other board member.

James Stuart, who has an email as a member of the Lake District National Park Authority, could have referred to practice there and used his position as chair to urge other board members to adopt what is seen as basic good practice in other National Parks. Instead he kept his silence and the matter did not even get to the vote.

Five of the board members nominated by Scottish Ministers were re-appointed for a second four year term in October without their jobs being re-advertised. Sadly these members appear to regard themselves as only beholden to Scottish Ministers and to be above engaging with the general public. That did not stop the LLTNPA marketing team issuing a Xmas video ([see here](#)) later in the week as further confirmation of the Park's priorities under Mr Stuart in which the LLTNPA claim not just to be supporting local communities but listening to young people. How locally elected and Scottish Government nominated members do this when when they won't even agree to having contact emails is unclear.

It appears, however, Mr Perrie's attempted intervention has had some effect. The following has very recently been added to the LLTNPA website ([see here](#)):

Locally Elected Board Member Assistance

The National Park is divided into five Electoral Wards with a Locally Elected Board member for each Ward. Should you require the assistance of your Locally Elected Board Member, please email the address committeeclerk@lochlomond-trossachs.org with your Locally Elected Board Member's name in the subject title for your enquiry to be directed to your Locally Elected Board Member.

Unfortunately this arrangement means any correspondence to Board Members including whistleblowing by staff about their managers will first be seen by senior management! It is therefore not fit for purpose. Moreover, this offer is not open to people who wish to contact the Scottish Government nominees on the Board.

One hopes that Heather Reid, who appears to lack much of Mr Stuart's baggage, will show real leadership when she assumes the convener role in February and seek support from Lorna Slater, the Minister for National Parks, to reform the governance of the LLTNPA. She could also do worse than talk to Xander McDade, convener of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, about what they have been trying to do to improve openness and the accountability. Judging by how the LLTNPA board reacted on Monday it appears she faces quite a challenge.

This may not, however, all be the fault of Board Members. From the moment they are appointed, senior management at the LLTNPA drum into them at induction training that they are accountable to Scottish Ministers not the public and stress their role is confined to a very limited range of tasks. There is nothing in the law to say this should be the case, its all part of the insidious centralisation of power in Scotland, but as a result Board Members serve very little useful purpose and many appear to see the

appointment as money for old rope.

One of the councillors appointed by Scottish Ministers in the summer, Hazel Sorrell from West Dunbartonshire Council, has missed her first two board meetings. Perhaps she is ill? But a little more accountability to the public might help sharpen board members act and weed out those who shouldn't be there.

The even bigger challenge for Heather Reid is that if the LLTNPA Board is incapable of seeing the need for even minor reforms in the way it operates, what hope for it successfully tackling the big issues like climate change?

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